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IS NATURE CRUEL?

BY JOHN BURROUGHS

I

To deny that Nature is cruel, in the strict sense of the term, were, to the majority of persons, like denying that blood is red, or that fire will burn. We use the term "cruel" loosely, and interpret the ways of Nature in terms of our own psychology. Thus a well-known philosopher and writer, Professor Jacks of Manchester College, Oxford, in writing upon "Our Common Foe" in a recent magazine article takes it for granted at the outset that Nature is cruel, and moreover, that she is as cruel as the Germans have shown themselves to be in this cruelest of all wars. "There is a cruelty in Nature," he says, "and it has been reserved for our age to realize how immense is its range and how appalling its effects;" we realize it, he says, when we read the story of Germany's treatment of her prisoners, the story of her submarines, and her conduct toward unoffending non-combatants generally.

What worse thing could be said about Nature than that she is as bad as the Germans? It almost makes us suspect treachery and death in her summer breezes and her sunshine. Dr. Jacks seeks to justify his charge by averring that man is a part of Nature and that in him are summarized her good and her evil qualities. Of course, in a certain sense this is true. But in seeking to solve the problems of his life, man separates himself from the rest of Nature and holds himself amenable to standards of conduct that he does not apply to the orders below him. He regards himself as a superior being. He is a part of Nature, but of an emancipated and regenerated Nature. He is one with the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the air, only in his purely animal aspects. As a moral and spiritual being with a sense of truth and justice, of mercy and forgiveness, as well as of their op-

posites,—falsehood, cruelty, injustice,—he stands on a higher plane. He cannot justify his conduct by an appeal to brute Nature or to biological laws. His sins are more scarlet and his virtues more divine than those of his unmoral and unreasoning brute neighbors. His consciousness of right and wrong is the touchstone by which all his deeds are to be tried.

Tennyson's agonizing line—"Nature red in tooth and claw"—tends, especially in these days of world-wide human carnage, to make one see the whole animal kingdom with blood-dripping claws and jaws. But it is not so. At its worst this "tooth and claw" business applies only to a fraction of wild life. The vast army of the seed eaters, the plant eaters, the fruit eaters, upon which the flesh eaters subsist, and help keep in check, is greatly in the ascendancy.

The whole truth of this matter of the cruelty of Nature may be put in a nut-shell: Nature as seen in animal life is *sanguinary*, but only man is *cruel*. Only man deliberately and intentionally inflicts pain, only man tortures his victims, and takes pleasure in their agony. No other creature goes out of its way to inflict suffering; no other creature acts from the motive of cruelty, or the will to give pain.

Nature kills, but does not torture. The biological laws are neither human nor inhuman, they are *unhuman*. If in following the rule that might makes right, the Germans seek their justification by an appeal to the biological laws, then do they fall below the beasts of the field, because they are moral beings, and know good from evil.

Biological laws are not concerned about the moral law. Not till we reach man's moral nature does this law have any validity; then it becomes a biological law, because it has survival value. Could the race of man ever have developed as we now see it without the conceptions of right and justice and the spirit of mutual helpfulness? As time passes, other things being equal, the most righteous and humanitarian nation will be the most powerful and the most progressive. The great strength of the Allied cause in this war is that it is founded upon an ideal conception of international justice and comity. President Wilson has set this forth in such wonderful completeness that it will shine in our political firmament for all time like a star of the first magnitude. And the weakness of the German cause, and that which will result in its ultimate overthrow, is that it is based upon the spirit and the aims of the pirate and the highwayman.

When we speak of Nature's cruelty we are obsessed with the idea that blood and death necessarily mean cruelty, whereas cruelty, as I have said, means an intentional infliction of pain or suffering. Is the surgeon cruel when he performs an operation? Do your own carnivorous habits imply cruelty? The slaughter-house is not a pleasant object to contemplate; the sight of blood disturbs most of us; its sight and smell excite even the unreasoning brutes. But it is the wanton shedding of blood that reacts unfavorably upon ourselves, and makes us indifferent to the suffering which blood so often implies. Life is a wonderful and precious gift, and we do not like to see it wantonly destroyed.

Professor Jacks speaks of "the hot foul breath of Nature's cruelty," a sentence which is mild enough when applied to the Germans, but which is not justified when applied to universal Nature. We can hardly accuse the laws of matter and force of being cruel when they destroy us; if they were not true to themselves, what permanence would there be to life or to anything else? Fire and flood, the earthquake and the tornado, cause pain and death, gravity will crush us as soon as sustain us, but these forces are not cruel, because there is no will to inflict suffering; they are a part of the system of things upon which our life and well-being depend.

Nature, in the action of her mechanical and chemical forces as they go their way about us, is apparently as indifferent to man as to all other forms of life, but, to speak in the same terms of our human experience, something must have been solicitous about man or he would not be here and in a world so well suited to his development and well-being. In the conflict of forces he has had to take his chances with other forms of life, but his powers of adaptation and invention far surpass those of all other creatures. Not an atom, not a pebble, will turn aside to save him from destruction; unrelenting and unpitying Nature is the school in which his powers have been developed, and for him to call Nature "cruel" in her treatment of him is for a child to upbraid the parent whose guidance and discipline foster and safeguard the coming man. Could man have become man on any other terms?

Love is creation's final law, though Tennyson seems to doubt it when he looks upon Nature as "red in tooth and claw." But tooth and claw do not necessarily imply cruelty, since the cruelest of all animals—man—has them not; they

imply the dependence of one form of life upon another form, and are thus associated in our minds with that most heinous of all crimes, murder. It is Nature's seeming indifference to life which causes us to charge her with cruelty. Our minds can take in but a fraction of the total scheme of things, and what we do take in we make a personal application of to ourselves. We humanize when we should generalize. The love of the Eternal for man appears not to be that of a father for his son, or of a mother for her child; it is more like that of a general for his army; he is going to lead that army through toil and agony and death, but he is going to lead it to victory. The long road of evolution which man has traversed is a hard road, but the battle is won. He has paid the price of his development in toil and suffering, but the victory is at last secure. The flower and fruit of his moral and spiritual nature have come in the fullness of time.

The Germans have wilfully turned their backs upon the natural biological law of righteousness or rightness, and their punishment is sure to be swift and adequate. They have made a religion of cruelty, as man alone has exhibited it, and have cultivated the will to destroy and defame till mankind, with one accord, has bestowed upon them their ancestral name, the Huns. They have gone forth to burn and pillage and murder, and, so far as lay in their power, to destroy the very earth of the peoples they sought to conquer. They have summoned to their aid all the diabolical forces of which chemistry is capable, and if they could control the seismic and meteorological forces as well, who doubts that they would make a desert, blackened with fire and torn by earthquakes, where dwell the nations that oppose them?

The spirit they have shown in this war, and the nefarious crimes they have been guilty of, make it a serious question whether or not they should not be forever cast out from the family of civilized nations; whether indeed they should not be completely wiped off the map as a nation, and their power for further evil forever destroyed.

"There is no place in the world of the future," says Dr. Jacks, "for a people whose policy is tainted by the instinct for cruelty."

If Nature were as cruel as the Germans are, if the same lust for blood and suffering had run in her veins, if she had, in the same spirit of riot and wantonness, destroyed her own creatures and laid waste her own provinces, would you or I,

or anyone else, have been here to pass judgment upon her doings?

There is blood and death in the jungle, but no lust of pain; but in the German prisons, and in the path of Germany's armies, there is the deliberate infliction of suffering and agony for their own sakes, so that for generations to come the name of Germany will stand for all that is selfish, cruel, unchivalrous, ignoble, insulting, and bestial in human history. The Prussian officer spits in the face of his prisoners of a like rank, and follows this with insulting epithets and blows, and seeks in every way to bring them down to his own bestial level. The Prussian nurse brings to a wounded British soldier the glass of water he begs for, holds it close to his face, then pours it on the ground and hands him the empty glass.

II

Nature has an anesthetic of her own which she uses in taking life. The carnivorous animals inflict far less pain than appearances would seem to indicate. Tooth and claw usually overwhelm by a sudden blow, and sudden blows benumb and paralyze. Violence in this light is the handmaiden of Mercy. If the surgeon could perform his operations in the same sudden and violent manner, an anesthetic would rarely be needed. Livingston was conscious of but little pain when in the jaws of a lion, and its prey no doubt feels as little. The human criminal, electrocuted or hung or beheaded, probably experiences but little conscious suffering. Anyone whose life has been suddenly imperilled by a railway or a runaway accident knows how blessed is the blankness which comes over his mind at the most critical moment; the suddenness and intensity of his alarm blots out consciousness, and he retains no memory of just what happened. The soldier in battle may be seriously or fatally wounded and not be aware of it till some time afterward. A crushing or tearing blow disrupts the machinery of sensation. It is only when we put ourselves in the place of the mouse with which the cat is playing that we pity it; it does not experience the agony we would feel under like conditions; it is usually unwounded; it does not know what awaits it and its comparative freedom of movement soothes its alarm.

Dr. Jacks speaks of the bloody work of the struggle for existence, but the struggle for existence is largely a bloodless

struggle of adaptation. Through it, every creature sooner or later finds its place, finds where it fits into the scheme of things. Through it the mouse finds its place, and the lion its, and man has found his. Living bodies are not ready-made, so to speak, like the parts of machinery; they are constantly in the making, and their making is a process of transformation. The horse, as we know him, was millions of years in the making; so was the elephant; so was man; so was every other form of life. The struggle for existence as a whole is cruel only so far as all discipline and all insensible modifications and adaptations under the pressure of environment are cruel; it is good in the guise of evil; it is the stern beneficence of impartial law. The greater the power of adaptation, the more fit is the animal or plant to survive, and this power of adaptation is mainly what distinguishes living bodies from non-living. Inanimate bodies tend to adjust themselves to one another through mechanical laws; animate bodies tend to adapt themselves to one another and to their environment through vital laws.

The struggle for existence is for the most part a struggle with inanimate nature—with climate, soil, wind, flood. A peaceful struggle is going on all around us at all times, among men as among animals and plants: a struggle to live, to compel Nature to yield us the things needed for our lives. It is not often competition—an effort to win what another must lose: it is an effort to seize and appropriate the elements that all may have on equal terms, by the exercise of strength, industry, wit, prudence. Life is predacious only to a limited extent. In the wilds, in the jungle, one form devours another form, but Nature compensates. A fuller measure of life is given to those forms that are the prey of other forms; they are more prolific. The rats and mice are vastly more prolific than the weasels or the owls that feed upon them; the rabbits have ten young to one of their enemy, the fox; the lesser birds greatly outnumber the hawks; the little fishes that are the food of the big fishes swarm in the sea.

Probably no species is ever exterminated by its natural enemies. These enemies only keep it in check. The birds keep the insects from ruining vegetation, which is the source of all food. Slay all the lions in Africa, and probably the struggle for existence of the antelope tribe would soon be harder than it is now. Hence the animals of prey are a good gift even to the animals they prey upon. The plus of the

breeding instinct of the latter would in time result in overpopulation and in famine.

The things that are preyed upon are more joyous and contented than their enemies. The carnivorous animals are solitary and morose, the birds of prey are the same. The chipmunk seems to have a much better time than the weasel, the bluebird than the owl that lines its nest with blue feathers. One might envy the song sparrow, or the vesper sparrow, or the robin, but never the shrike nor the sharp-skinned hawk that pursue them. The eagle is a grand bird, but evidently the lark is much the happier. The jay devours the eggs and the young of the smaller birds, but these birds greatly outstrip him in the race of life. The murderers evidently have less joy in their lives than the murdered. The crow rarely sheds blood, and, compared with the hawk, he is a happy-all-the-year-round vagabond.

Nature has made the wild creatures fearful of their natural enemies, and has endowed them with means to escape them; then she has equipped these enemies with weapons and instincts to defeat this (her own) purpose. She plays one hand against another. Wild life is divided into two warring camps, and, as in our own wars, new devices for defense on the one hand are met with new devices of attack on the other. The little night rodents have big and sharp eyes, but the owl that preys upon them has big and sharp eyes also, and his flight is as silent as a shadow. You see, Nature is impartial; she has the good of all creatures at heart. If it is good for the hawk to eat the bird, it is good for the bird to be equipped with swift wings and sharp eyes to evade the hawk. A little more advantage on either side and the game would be blocked—the birds would fail, or the hawks would starve. As it is, “the race is to the swift and the battle to the strong.” Nature keeps the balance. Action and reaction are equal. The skunk and the porcupine have little or no fear, neither have they much wit. Their weapons of defence are nearly always ready, and that of the porcupine acts automatically; that of the skunk is a little more deliberate and inflicts less pain, but gives great discomfort and discomfort.

Nature keeps one form in check with another form, and thus, like a wise capitalist, distributes her investments so that the income is constant. If she put her funds all in mice and birds, the cats and owls would soon starve; if she put them

all in woodchucks, the pastures and meadows would soon fail the herds. And this reminds me how man often disturbs the balance of nature; the clearing up and the cultivation of the land have held in check the natural enemies of the woodchucks—foxes and owls—at the same time that they have greatly increased the woodchuck's sources of food supply, so that in some sections these rodents have become a real pest to the farmer. The same changed conditions appreciably favor the meadow mice, and they, too, seem to be on the increase. But this increase again may stimulate the increase of the mice-hunting hawks, and thus the balance be maintained. Herein lies the danger of introducing new forms of wild life in a country—their natural enemies are not always on hand to check them. The mongoose has overrun Jamaica and has not yet found an adequate natural enemy. Introduced into this country it would be an incalculable calamity, though in time it would doubtless meet with a natural check. Our weasels, to which family the mongoose belongs, are prolific, and seem to have few natural enemies, and yet they do not unduly increase; it seems as if some unknown hand must stay them. They prey upon all the smaller rodents and find them easy victims, yet these rodents are vastly more numerous than the blood suckers. I often see marks upon the snow where the muskrat and the rabbit have fallen before them, and yet one sees scores of these animals to one weasel or mink.

How our domestic animals would suffer if they had the gift of ideation and knew what awaited them! Pope anticipated me when he wrote:

The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed to-day,
Had he thy reason could he skip and play?

Pleased to the last he crops the flowery food,
And licks the hand just raised to shed his blood.

If the horse only knew his own strength, and knew that he had "rights," would there not soon be a horse rebellion? Would the swine and the cattle fatten in their pens and stalls if they knew what is before them? Animals suffer no mental anguish either over the past or concerning the future; they live in the present moment; no future looms before them, no past haunts their memories. Their pain is brief, their joy is unconscious; they live to feed and breed; they slay without

penalties, and they are slain without remorse; they find their place and live their day, and Mother Nature reaps the harvest.

Would we have a world without struggle or pain or friction of any kind? Good means ease, leisure, security; but it means something more: it means achievement, victory, the overcoming of evil, the development of power, the making of the world a better place to live in, and much more. Is Nature a tyrant because we have to earn our living? Because we have to plow and plant and hoe? Because flood and fire will destroy us, and the winds wrack us, if we loose our grip? We have life on these terms, the terms of struggle; they are the conditions that beget and sustain life. A world void of evil, as we use the word, would be a world void of good also; it would be a negative world. Without death there can be no life; without struggle there can be no power.

JOHN BURROUGHS.